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ABSTRACT

Project STEPE (Strengthening Teacher Effectiveness Through a Partnership of Equals), designed to improve instruction, involves collaboration between Western Carolina University and seven rural North Carolina school systems. The consortium also includes several institutions associated with education and rural issues, two community colleges, parents, business leaders, and government officials. The mission of Project STEPE is to strengthen teacher effectiveness by concentrating available local resources on the problems or issues identified by the participating school partners. A paid consultant coordinates the project and chairs the Western Regional Council for the Improvement of Teacher Effectiveness (WRCITE), which is composed of representatives of each STEPE partner and the steering committee of STEPE. Suggestions from the various interest groups on WRCITE established the agenda for STEPE projects. The consultant attends all local meetings and each WRCITE meeting to advise and coordinate the consortium. Some activities of STEPE include: (1) shared staff development programs; (2) grant projects; (3) new teacher programs; and (4) collaborative research. Evaluation of STEPE suggest that more involvement by representatives from business, government, and parental ranks is needed as well increased awareness of the programs, improved evaluation of teacher effectiveness, and additional research projects. (KS)

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PROJECT STEPE: A COLLABORATIVE MODEL FOR IMPROVING TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS IN RURAL SCHOOLS

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Project STEPE: A collaborative model for improving teacher effectiveness in rural schools

Rural schools can share resources and reap the benefits enjoyed by their larger urban neighbors. Project STEPE (Strengthening Teacher Effectiveness Through a Partnership of Equals) was born because a group of rural schools in western North Carolina believe in the power of sharing. Project STEPE is not just another story of successful collaboration, but a story of a unique structure and process created to make rural educators more successful. These unique features are woven throughout the following narrative of Project STEPE.

In the fall of 1989, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction offered grants to K-12 schools who through collaboration with a university, would promote change resulting in improved instruction. Public school/university collaboration for promoting change and improving instruction, is strongly supported in the research. Trubowitz (1986) expresses confidence that when a public school and a college work together, the process produces constant, positive change. The goal of improving the way children learn in school through improved teaching should be at the heart of school/university collaboration (DeBevoise 1986).

Western Carolina University has served the K -12 schools of western North Carolina since its beginning in 1897. The university, home to approximately 6000 students, is in the rural Appalachian mountains fifty-two miles west of the nearest urban setting, Asheville. The School of Education and Psychology, one of the largest schools in the university, serves the region by developing teachers and offering graduate programs in teaching, administration, counseling and other support areas. The mission of the School of Education and Psychology recognizes the special needs of rural educators,

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and an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership that emphasizes rural school leadership is in the planning stage. The school is also home to the Office for Rural Education. Service to local schools is strongly emphasized by the School of Education and Psychology. Western Carolina University personnel initiated the concept of a rural university/public school consortium.

The partners of STEPE

Western Carolina University is the university partner of STEPE and university personnel coordinate the project. Surrounding the university are seven rural school systems that helped plan STEPE and presently are the basis for its existence.The Cherokee Central Schools, a federally funded system serving 1,000 students of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, is a charter member of the organization. The five public county systems entering the consortium as charter members are as follows: Cherokee county Schools (3,723), Clay County Schools (1,261), Graham County Schools (1,355), Jackson County Schools (3,723), and Macon County Schools (3,541). The Swain County Schools (1,679) joined STEPE during the summer of 1991. All the schools have characteristics commonly associated with rural schools.

In their wisdom, the L.E.A.'s and the university invited neighboring institutions involved in education to join the consortium. This unique feature of the consortium returns many positive benefits. The Western Technical Assistance Center is an active member of STEPE. The center is an arm of the State Department of Public Instruction and serves the public schools in western North Carolina. A goal of the center is to provide staff development opportunities for constituent schools, and the center representative serves in that capacity for the STEPE partners. The North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching (NCCAT), located on the campus at Western Carolina

University, is a unique institution whose function is to provide growth activities for teachers in all North Carolina schools. NCCAT is a charter member of STEPE and is an excellent resource for identifying consultants and structuring workshops. A second institution located on the Western Carolina University campus, The Center for the Improvement of Mountain Living (CIML), is a STEPE partner that joined shortly after the project organized. The center is able to merge the interests of STEPE with other rural social issues addressed by CIML. The center representative to STEPE provides a rural perspective for the partners and is helpful in identifying consortium priorities. Two community colleges serve the consortium partners. Tri-County Community College serves students in Cherokee, Clay and Graham Counties; and Southwestern Community College serves students in Jackson, Macon And Swain Counties and the Cherokee Central Schools. Each community college participates in STEPE as an equal partner, and both help constituent schools plan activities for teachers.

The STEPE mission

The partners of STEPE adopt the wisdom of experts who proclaim that improving learning should be at the heart of every school-university collaborative effort (DeBevoise 1986; Schlechty & Whitford 1988). Improved learning is the common and unifying goal of the project. The partners agree that improved learning will occur when teachers become more effective, making teacher effectiveness the primary focus of the project.

It is the mission of Project STEPE to strengthen teacher effectiveness by concentrating available local resources on the problems or issues identified by the participating partners. The formal objectives of STEPE are as follows:

1. To bring to bear on the complex task of strengthening teacher education, the

knowledge and experience of the following groups in the rural participating counties: elementary and secondary school teachers; school administrators and support personnel; community leaders; parents of school children; faculty members in the arts and sciences, business, and education schools at Western Carolina University, and members of other institutions serving the youth of the area.

2. To heighten the professional and lay communities' awareness of the region's rural educational problems and to sustain community wide interest and participation in the task of strengthening teacher education and teacher effectiveness.

3. To identify and organize a competent cadre of professional and lay volunteers who are dedicated to improving teacher effectiveness. Vital to the success of STEPE, these individuals recruited from all segments of the rural communities and imbued with a Peace Corps spirit, will be designated as members of VITLE (Volunteers for the Improvement of Teaching, Learning and Education).

4. To make, through more effective coordination, maximum use of existing state-supported special centers and offices that have the capacity of helping to strengthen teacher education particularly in the rural setting of the STEPE schools.

The objectives of the project guide the efforts of the partners as they plan activities to improve teacher effectiveness.

The structure of Project STEPE

The North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction funded STEPE in the amount of $50,000.00 for the first 18 months of operation. The funds for STEPE became available on January 1, 1990 and continued through June 30, 1991. Each partner pledged a local supplement if new funds could not be obtained following the expiration of the state grant . The project is currently self supporting and the partners

are actively seeking funding.

The STEPE office is located in a public school located near the campus of Western Carolina University. The grant provided funds for a half time secretary and a consultant during the first 18 months of operation. The STEPE partners hope to continue funding these staff positions. The Jackson County Schools serve as fiscal agent for the project.

All persons active in STEPE, other than the consultant and secretary, volunteer services which is compatible with one of the project objectives stated earlier. Included in the cadre of volunteers is the author of this manuscript who serves as project coordinator. The coordinator is responsible for chairing WRCITE (Western Regional Council for the Improvement of Teacher Effectiveness) which is the steering committee of STEPE, supervising the STEPE office, and processing all expenditures.

The project is governed by WRCITE, a steering committee that brings together representatives from each STEPE partner to study problems or issues related to teacher effectiveness. The unique features of these local representatives and the governing council, WRCITE, are addressed in the following two sections.

The local committee: A basic feature of rural collaboration

Collaboration to improve education has special meaning in rural areas. A small town school is like the whirlpool of a river. It engages everyone because, like the river's eddy, it irresistibly draws the community's residents into it. The small town encompasses everything within its reach and serves as a foundation for the community (Schmuck and Schmuck 1990).

In rural North Carolina, people's thoughts about their community are rooted in the schools. Dunne (1983) reports that small rural communities view local schools as crucial to their continuing existence and that the schools are the center of daily life in the community. McCracken (1989) proposes that community leaders perceive rural schools as important to the community in educational, social, cultural and economic ways. "Rural communities", says McCracken, "seem more sensitive than others to each of these four factors" (p. 12). Goodlad (1984) evoked the image of the school and the community as partners sharing a common agenda; that education is a community wide activity rather than a school based activity. The school is indeed the center of activity in rural communities, and school decisions, therefore, effect the community more profoundly. Rural residents must be involved more often in school decisions.

Provision for community wide involvement is provided through the local school committee, a unique and basic feature of Project STEPE. Interacting together on the local committee are school administrators and teachers plus community members involved in parenting, local businesses and local government. A member-at-large is also appointed. Each local member is an automatic voting member of WRCITE. The non-educators on the committee are extremely valuable to the STEPE process, for they provide a community perspective on teacher effectiveness. Each local K-12 committee with its divergent membership is the cornerstone of STEPE.

Western Carolina is also permitted a local committee of eight representatives appointed by the Dean from the staff of the School of Education and Psychology. Like the local K-12 school committees, the university committee meets often to review the university's role in STEPE. Each member of the local university committee also

holds a voting membership on WRCITE.

The local meetings held by each K-12 partner and the meetings of the university committee produce a useful dialogue regarding the needs of local schools. The presence of the project consultant and the project coordinator at local meetings facilitates the idea of collaboration, for these staff persons exchange information from other partners and other meetings. At the local committee level, proposals are also formed for recommendation to WRCITE. Each local committee appoints a coordinator to communicate proposals to WRCITE and be responsible for correspondence to and from the STEPE office .

WRCITE: The action council

Gross (1988) stresses the leadership role that the university dean and the K-12 superintendents must play in collaborative organizations. Gross also mentions business executives, college faculty, public school teachers, parents, government officials, and retired executives as key contributors to a local school/university consortium. Gross practically names the membership of the council created to manage STEPE, The Western Regional Council for the Improvement of Teacher Effectiveness (WRCITE).

The council held its initial meeting in March 1990, with an impressive number of eligible members present. A dinner meeting was held on the Western Carolina University campus to capture the importance of togetherness and the mission of improving teacher effectiveness. The objective was successfully achieved. During the opening session, group meetings were held for members from similar occupations across the boundaries of all partner schools. Parents met together, business persons

formed a second group, and government officials also joined together. Teachers and administrators met with their respective groups. Each group shared its hopes for the STEPE initiative. The initial suggestions of these interest groups establish the agenda for future STEPE projects.

WRCITE continues to meet monthly. Membership at the meetings is now more typically in the range of 25 to 30 members, but that is considered an admirable figure. Interest remains high. The meeting are held in the evening and the location rotates to encourage local participation. The meeting format of WRCITE includes time for each local committee, special committee and each special partner to report. There is, of course, time to return to old business and to introduce new business. The secretary sends a copy of WRCITE minutes and other communications to all partners. The consultant always reports meeting activities to partners who are absent. The interchange of ideas in a cooperative environment has made WRCITE meetings productive.

Role of the consultant: The circuit rider concept

Since STEPE is an organization of volunteers, the partners felt that a salaried consultant could provide day-to-day congruence for the project. A job description was developed for the consultant position, and the partners identified the person who best fit the description. The committees's choice, a retired professor in the School of Education and Psychology and a former school administrator, accepted the position. STEPE now benefits from the services of a consultant who knows thoroughly the public schools in western North Carolina and the operations of the School of Education and Psychology. The consultant attends all local meetings and each meeting of WRCITE.

The consultant performs the usual advising function but also adds a new dimension to the project. The consultant makes regular informal visits to each STEPE partner and encourages active participation in the consortium. The consultant has adopted the presence of a circuit rider who passes information from one partner to another. He encourages local committees to meet regularly and investigates when partners are absent from steering committee meetings.The circuit rider concept is important to the success of the project for the partners are located in a rural setting with one partner as much as two hours away from a second partner.

As STEPE organizes for the future without the benefit of state department funds, the consultant position may be lost. The initial contribution, however, has been significant.

Improving teacher effectiveness: The activities of STEPE

As STEPE matured, two major thrusts developed in the quest to improve teacher effectiveness. First, the STEPE partners share local staff development programs planned by each local school and financed with individual local development funds. At a meeting held early each school year, each partner identifies local staff development plans and indicates the extent of participation by the other partners. A master list of activities for the approaching year is distributed through a monthly newsletter. It is this sharing that will be continued regardless of the future availability of funding. This thrust is also easily duplicated by other potential consortia wishing to share resources.

The second major STEPE thrust is the development of special projects funded by STEPE grant funds. One of the first activities of WRCITE was to identify issues or

problems that impacted teacher effectiveness. Two major issues surfaced as a result of discussion among the partners: (a) teacher motivation and morale and (b) internal and external school communications. A VITLE (Volunteers for the Improvement of Teaching, Learning and Education) committee was appointed to study each issue and recommend programs to deal with the issue. Both committees, staffed with a volunteer from each partner district, met and recommended general guidelines to WRCITE. The council continually uses these guidelines when considering projects. The following activities have been or are currently sponsored by STEPE:

---- A workshop to train elementary teachers in the use of hands-on science materials.

---- A test interpretation workshop for K-12 teachers.

---- Training for teachers in a workshop on cooperative learning.

---- A workshop to train teachers in the use of multi-media in the classroom.

---- A Democracy in Education workshop to encourage shared decision-making.

---- A satelliite television course on interactive video that hopefully will lead to cooperative interactive programming for the partners.

---- A two day workshop for all instructional personnel in three of the LEA's on skills to improve teaching on all levels and in all disciplines.

Besides workshops and training opportunities for teachers, other initiatives are sponsored by STEPE. A committee composed of one representative from each K-12 partner reviewed the teacher education program at Western Carolina University. The Director of the Math and Science lab at Western Carolina University coordinated the writing of a grant to involve the parents of three STEPE schools in the math learning activities of their students. The project titled "Parent Math" was funded in the fall of 1990 and has been evaluated very positively by all participants.

A project that is organized and waiting to emerge is a project to develop activities to

help new teachers cope with unique problems. A team of five persons from the School of Education and Psychology is assigned to each local STEPE school. The teams are on-call to each district and, when called, meet with local officials to analyze the needs of new teachers and develop programs to meet those needs.

Collaborative research is valued by the partners and a formal method of initiating research projects has been developed. To date, the partners have collaborated in a project to research the delivery of special programs such as art, music and physical education in the member schools. University researchers have also collaborated with the Graham County Schools to evaluate a model preschool program. Liberman (1986) advises that collaborative research can be accomplished in a variety of ways, and it can promote professional development. This thought captures the importance placed on collaborative research by the partners.

The STEPE projects are probably no different from those developed by other school districts operating without the benefit of a consortium. The difference is the collaborative sharing that each project produces and, of course, the financial benefits. The collaborative efforts of STEPE are building relationships that will continue long after initial grant monies have been expended. Holmes (1990) captures the value of collaboration in STEPE or any other rural setting. " Collaboration", says Holmes (p. 10), " is simply a way to stretch limited educational resources, draw on a pool of successful education programs and practices, and mitigate the loneliness and isolation that may accompany working in a rural location." The partners of STEPE are less lonely because of the success of the project and richer because the dollar has been stretched.

The evaluation of STEPE: What works and what needs fixing

The objectives of Project STEPE have been evaluated twice during the first 18 months of operation. As a result of the evaluation, the partners unanimously voted to continue operating the consortium. A summary of what works with Project STEPE and what needs fixing is presented for the benefit of educators who wish to develop collaborative organizations. The following aspects of the consortium are considered most valuable by the partners:

---- Staff development activities planned by each individual partner are made available to other partners who wish to participate.

---- Activities planned by the consortium are initiated to meet needs expressed by teachers. Sharing across districts has been a valuable experience.

---- STEPE activities are publicized through the media making citizens more aware of teacher needs and efforts to meet those needs.

---- The bonds formed between state supported agencies addressing educational issues and the K-12/university partners stronger.

---- The presence of business leaders, government officials and parents in the decision making process is helpful.

The following components of STEPE need some fixing. They are being addressed by the STEPE partners and should be helpful to those educators who might wish to replicate the process.

---- WRCITE representatives from business, government offices and parental ranks are not as active in the organization as was anticipated. Restructuring is under way to better utilize the talents of these contributors.

--- All classroom teachers need to be more aware of STEPE and the opportunities the consortium offers.

---- STEPE currently is evaluated by measuring input and process. The effectiveness of teachers in improving student learning outcomes needs to be evaluated.

---- The consortium needs to stimulate additional research projects.

The future of STEPE and rural collaboration

Rural schools must continue to explore the advantages of collaboration, for sharing may eliminate the need for less desirable solutions to the problems of small rural schools. The perception that bigger is better, for example, has moved consolidation to the top of many legislative agendas and strengthens the idea that the larger more cosmopolitan school is superior to the small rural school. Collaboration can be an alternative to consolidation. Collaboration between K-12 school systems and universities is also a growing demand of agencies governing education, and educators who voluntarily develop collaborative projects will be ahead of the initiative.

Collaborative efforts like STEPE provide small and/or rural schools the advantages of larger schools, while still preserving the benefits of local community oriented schools. Collaboration between K -12 schools and the university helps small schools cope with complex and expensive efforts such as restructuring, site based management and school improvement. The STEPE partners are currently seeking funds from government agencies and business partnerships that will allow the partners to work together on these initiatives. Regardless of the success of these funding initiatives, it is probable that the STEPE partners will continue to share. The strength of STEPE rests in people who believe in the power of a partnership of equals.

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PROJECT STEPE GOVERNANCE